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ABSTRACT

In the early stages of higher education desegregation, there was a disproportionate shifting of black students to historically white institutions. Today, it is estimated that about 82% of all black students in colleges and universities are enrolled in traditionally white institutions. As desegregation proceeded, the conviction grew that it was to flow in one direction: black into white. As state desegregation plans were developed under court directives, they were, at times, attended by calls for closing of black institutions or their merger into white higher education. Leaders and managers of black institutions have been slow to admit the existence of this trend; few, therefore, sought to compensate by broadening their institutional missions to appeal to a general community constituency. As a result, many black institutions lost enrollment and suffered financial distress. Many presidents were timid about broadening their missions for fear of criticism from the campus and local black community. More recently, however, statistics indicate a rather significant fact: black colleges and universities have been discovered by nonblacks as useful and effective channels of access to higher education. In all instances where there is high integration, state-supported institutions are involved. Because of public status and size, resources and curriculum breadth are significantly related dimensions and account for the appeal to these institutions across race lines. The idea held by some that some black educational institutions must be preserved for blacks only is inappropriate and self-limiting in today's environment. (SM)

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# Black Colleges

## Something of Value

*by Albert N. Whiting*

**Desegregation left many traditionally black institutions struggling. Their survival may depend on new strategies to increase enrollment.**

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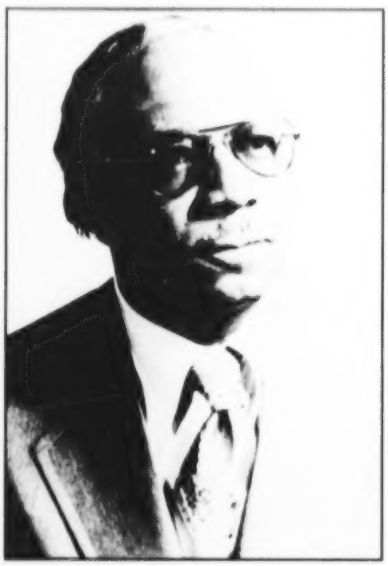
Despite the hope and encouragement generated by the 1954 and subsequent court desegregation decisions, one chilling reservation remained among blacks. Increasingly, as desegregation proceeded (whether reluctantly or not), the conviction grew that it was to flow in one direction—black into white.

The underlying assumption issued out of the "contrast conception" built up in our social system: that white was, or is, superior and black inferior.

The reality of desegregation in public primary and secondary schools was that minority schools closed, minority educational administrators were demoted, faculty competence and credentials were questioned, and black cultural heritage was demeaned. I hasten to add that such was not a uniform and universal practice but, nonetheless, a sufficiently common and visible one, throughout the South particularly, to occasion both comment and protest.



*Albert N. Whiting is chancellor emeritus of North Carolina Central University. He can be reached at 11253-B Slalom Lane, Columbia, MD 21044.*

Because students attended voluntarily, public higher education institutions and systems were not mandated to desegregate, so integration obviously took another form. However, the idea of the "contrast conception" still pervaded the minds of many. So, as state desegregation plans were developed under court directives they were, at times, attended by calls for the closing of black institutions or their merger into the white. In fact, several states are still wrestling with proposals of this nature.

In retrospect, what has occurred reflects a commendable managerial sensitivity to all of the economic, political, and social (even moral) forces involved. Higher education desegregation in public systems, therefore, has not had the devastating impact that its enforcement had initially on public elementary and secondary schools. Private institutions of higher education have always, in theory at least, been "open to all"; compliance did not involve legal compulsion, but rather acts of conscience.

Because all people in a society or culture are influenced by the prevailing themes, what happened in the early stages of higher education desegregation was predictable—namely, a disproportionate shifting of black students

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(beginning with the brightest and then expanding to all levels) to the historically white institutions. Today, it is estimated that roughly 82 percent of all black students in colleges and universities are enrolled in traditionally white institutions.

The leaders and managers of the black institutions were often slow to admit the existence of this trend. Consequently, relatively few sought to compensate by broadening their institutional missions to appeal to a general community constituency. As a result, many black institutions lost enrollment while simultaneously suffering financial distress and questioning community support.

In addition, many presidents were somewhat timid about "broadening their missions" for fear of criticism and backlash from the campus and local black community. Would some quarters think them disloyal to "black nationalism"? Would they be abandoning the historical integrity and symbolism projected by the term *black institution*?

For these presidents and chancellors, it was, indeed, a dilemma fraught with the legendary dangers of passage between Scylla and Charybdis, a passage between two hazardous alternatives.

Consequently, "stand still" tactics generally were not harshly appraised by the black higher education community and its constituents, even though the stance tended to lead to two unpleasant results: the first, a threatening "survival trap" for many of the institutions; the second, a curious and persistent rationalization that there would be, at some undefinable moment, a reverse migration of black students, based on the assumption that a widely alleged "discomfort index" on the white campuses would foster such a return.

Events have proven this was not the case; rather, such thinking was an inexcusable exercise in self-delusion and wish fulfillment.

Something has occurred, however, partly in response to the efforts of administrators who understood the transitional realities and partly in response to geographic logistics, attitudinal changes, and the general pressing and broadening surge for higher education, particularly among nontraditional students. It's the increasing attendance at traditionally black schools by nonblacks.

The extent is, in fact, surprising and tends to contradict, in a comforting way, the conventional thinking that the integrative process flows only, or primarily, from minority to majority situations.

Data based on enrollment distribution statistics by race, published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 6, 1988, "1986 Minority Enrollment at 3,200 Institutions of Higher Education") indicate a rather significant, unexpected, and hitherto unheralded fact: black colleges and universities have been discovered by nonblacks as useful and effective channels of access to higher education.

Currently only three traditionally black institutions out of 100[1] have student bodies that are 100 percent black: Selma University (AL), Allen University (SC), and Saint Augustine's College (NC). Of the hundred, four are 99 percent black, and thirty two (including the aforementioned) are 95 percent or more black. This means that one third of the traditionally black colleges, for all intents and purposes, are about as segregated now as before the desegregation decisions.

There is another side of the coin, however. Of the hundred traditionally black institutions, forty six have enrollments ranging from 10 percent nonblack to 40 percent or more. The breakdown is as follows: twenty six traditionally black institutions are 10 percent nonblack; twelve are 20 percent nonblack; and eight are 33 percent or more nonblack. Schools with more than 30 percent nonblack students include Delaware State, Bowie State (MD), Langston (OK), and Tennessee State. In addition, four of the historically black institutions now have student bodies in which whites constitute the majority: West Virginia University, Bluefield State (WV), Lincoln University (MO), and Kentucky State. (The tally does not add to 100 because I am not including traditionally black institutions with low white enrollments but high foreign and/or Hispanic enrollments.)

It is interesting to note that in all instances where there is "high" integration, state-supported institutions are involved. Private schools, for the most part, reflect little or no movement in this direction, which I find somewhat surprising. In the early days of segregation, these schools were often described as "open to all," and in a few dramatic instances they actually did have children of white missionary faculty members in attendance in open violation of the segregation laws.

Size likewise seems to be a significant factor. For example, of the thirty-two schools with 95 percent or more black students, nineteen had enrollments under 1,000; eight had enrollments between 1,000 and 2,000; only three had enrollments over 2,000. From another perspective, in the eight traditionally black institu-

1. This figure varies from source to source. I'm referring here to *historically* black institutions, and the figure is based on data from *The Traditionally Black Institutions of Higher Education 1860–1982,* by Susan Hill, published by the National Center for Education Statistics, p. 18.

**Traditionally black institutions should no longer have reservations about actively participating in the desegregation process, particularly when not to do so could mean institutional suicide.**

tions with more than one third nonblack students, the enrollments were well over 2,000, with one exception; the enrollment in that instance was 1,901—very close to 2,000.

It is easy to speculate that because of public status and size, resources and curriculum breadth are significantly related dimensions and account for the appeal of these institutions across race lines. Other factors are undoubtedly likewise involved, as I implied earlier, such as location, leadership outreach, special and strategic programs, and perhaps delivery systems that appeal to nontraditional, commuting students. We also must recognize that state desegregation plans, mandated by the federal government, influence this reverse direction and process of integration.

Nevertheless, it remains that a "new day" is developing in higher education in this country, which may result, at long last, in the eventual blurring of the historic and psychic separation between white and black social structures in the United States. This "new day" signals a developing validation of the idea that diversity can be accommodated and legitimated by increasing sensitivity to it through the encouragement of new arrangements and mind-sets that address the needs and imperatives of shifting times. Traditionally white segregated institutions were forced by legal decisions to change their practices. Institutional adaptations have been reasonably well implemented so that now one is led to wonder why there was ever so much agony or emotional travail over such a simple social adjustment.

It has been demonstrated that accepting diversity is not dangerous, disruptive, or dispiriting but potentially positive, so leaders at traditionally black institutions should no longer have reservations about actively participating in the desegregation process, particularly when not to do so could mean institutional suicide.

In *The Third Wave,* Alvin Toffler writes, "we need to jettison the frightening, but false, assumption that increased diversity automatically brings increased tension and conflict in society. Indeed, the exact reverse can be true. . . . Given appropriate social arrangements, diversity can make for a secure, stable civilization." The figures on nonblack student enrollment at historically black institutions make it eminently clear that the artificial racial barriers built into the old socio-legal structure of the segregated system can be neutralized. What has occurred, almost informally, in the historically black schools can be accelerated through strong outreach recruitment programs.

The idea held by some that some black educational institutions must be preserved for blacks only is inappropriate and self-limiting in today's environment. To do so is illegal for public institutions or institutions accepting public moneys. And, to the extent that the idea is a recognition of the need for special instructional nurturing, it may ultimately result in a "negative expectancy," which, when internalized, could lead students to reduce their competitive effort and to lose self-esteem. No form of higher education should espouse, condone, or aid and abet this expectancy.

The symbolism of this increasing demographic change in the historically black institutions bodes well for the future and could lead to open enrollment patterns and broader student resource pools, which will accrue to the benefit of minority institutions in the United States. It introduces a new perspective on comparisons between race-based minority institutions and majority-group institutions. It confirms the frequently expressed black community opinion that black colleges are indeed "something of value" to be appreciated, nurtured, and supported. ■


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